



Review of Benedicta Ward and Paul Savage, transs., and E. Rozanne Elder, ed., The Great Beginning of Cîteaux: A Narrative of the Beginning of the Cistercian Order. The Exordium magnum of Conrad of Eberbach

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Review

BENEDICTA WARD and PAUL SAVAGE, trans., E. ROZANNE ELDER, ed., *The Great Beginning of Cîteaux: A Narrative of the Beginning of the Cistercian Order: The Exordium Magnum of Conrad of Eberbach*. (Cistercian Fathers Series 72.) Trappist: Cistercian Publications / Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012. Pp. xxx, 614. \$59.95. ISBN: 9780879071721

Conrad of Eberbach composed his *Exordium magnum cisterciense* between 1180 and 1215. He aimed at strengthening the Order in a time of pressure: to show the way ahead by looking to the past. To this end he drew on documentary sources, founding narratives, oral traditions as well as exempla and miracle stories. All of this is embedded in his grand history of the Cistercian Order: grounded in the teachings of Christ and the life of the Desert Fathers, it follows Benedict and supersedes Cluny. A monk at Clairvaux for some twenty years, Conrad ended his life near Mainz as abbot of Eberbach. The text revolves around Clairvaux; the second book is dedicated to Bernard and his miracles, and the two consecutive books set before us a miscellany of edifying tales about monks of Clairvaux. Conrad reaches out to other Cistercian abbeys as well: from Nydala in Sweden (146), via Fossa Nova in Italy (404) to Strata Florida in Wales (486). He even looks, albeit sporadically, beyond the Cistercians: to other monastic Orders, to the war between Pisa and Lucca (297) and to the schism between Frederick I Barbarossa and Alexander III (484).

Now, for the first time, the *Exordium magnum* has been translated into English. Benedicta Ward and Paul Savage have done a splendid job with Conrad's knotty Latin. The result is a highly readable text which makes generally available a vivid idealization of the late twelfth-century Cistercian world. *The Great Beginning* lends itself equally to a study of Conrad's historiographical project as a whole, and to exploration of specific chapters or books. But thanks to the impressively detailed index it is also possible to read thematically across the work. It invites a study of narrative representations of key monastic topoi such as 'Humility', 'Silence' and 'Solitude', and it enables us just as readily to track down other dimensions of Cistercian life. A pursuit of 'Scandal', for example, brings out suggestive portrayals of monastic communities. There is Gerard the Cellarer who was sick and was therefore allowed wine. Sensing that this privilege might provoke scandal, the Cellarer resolutely poured his wine into the communal jug of water and invited his brothers to share (216). There is the revolt planned by lay brothers at Schönau. On Christmas Eve, with everyone back from the granges, the lay brothers conspired to go to the monks' dormitory and slice up their boots. The scheme was discovered because of the rebel leader's pride. Unsurprisingly, the

abbot gave him a stern admonition, and God struck him down with a fearful death (pp. 430-32). Or again, we learn of a disagreement over the selling of monastic property. This sale made for discord between a prior and a community of nuns and left the latter scandalized (pp. 465-66). Other categories could be mined for additional information about cenobitic life: 'Feast', 'Habit', 'Murmuring'. A dip into the category 'Meal(s)' will take us from the novice who disliked peas so much that they made him sick, but one day miraculously found that the peas set before him were more delectable than meat, and then wolfed down his vegetables (162), via the excommunicated soldier whose dogs would not eat his bread crumbs because they smelled of decay (440), to the gory tale of the Premonstratensian who secretly feasted on the delicacies set aside for the sick; when he was moved to compunction, demons threw themselves at him lest they lose their grip and thus possessed, he plunged a knife into his throat. The monks followed the trail of blood and eventually found his body on the bell tower wall, whence they brought him down for confession (pp. 457-62). These stories could readily be supplemented by a traversal of categories such as 'Journey', 'Relics' or 'Ring'. In such cross-readings the *Exordium magnum* yields valuable insights into literary structures, communal identity, representations of practice, spiritual mores and more.

The foreword is by Brian McGuire, and the volume is prefaced by Benedicta Ward and introduced by Paul Savage. McGuire, who has worked on exempla, writes about the Cistercian 'love of stories', Ward, above all known for her translation of the Desert Fathers, accounts for the principles of translation and Savage, a specialist on the *Exordium magnum*, sets Conrad's work in its historical context in a comprehensive general introduction. The structure and tone of the introduction is perhaps somewhat too convoluted to be accessible to students with little prior knowledge of the Cistercian world. But the commentaries which accompany the translation are generally instructive in their succinct straddling of explanations as well as references to research literature and classical, patristic and medieval sources. The volume has a generous and detailed appendix with glossary, bibliography of sources and research literature, indexes of biblical, classical, patristic and medieval references as well as an ample general index. Whether it is the work of the translators or the editor, E. Rozanne Elder of Cistercian Publications, the apparatus deserves praise. It renders the translation useful in all sorts of ways, for scholar and student alike.

A translation makes a Latin source broadly accessible and provides a new resource for teaching. With a modicum of added information, *The Great Beginning* fulfils this purpose admirably. But often a translation prompts a broader scholarly awareness as well. *The Great Beginning* deserves such awareness, and Cistercian scholarship will be enriched if this work is

treated as a Cistercian composition of the twelfth century alongside Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song and Aelred of Rievaulx's treatise on friendship. Ward and Savage's fine translation and thorough apparatus have paved the way.

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